

RHEA A.
WHITE
1931–2007

BY NANCY L. ZINGRONE

Rhea A. White made more than “the most” out of her 75+ years of life, reinventing herself more than once. Born in Utica, New York, on May 6, 1931, White attended Utica College and Syracuse University from 1949 to 1951 and obtained her BA from Pennsylvania State University in 1953. Her golf game was of such excellence that she had a chance to become a national champion when a car accident in her junior year and its subsequent near-death experience turned her attention both inward and at that point toward parapsychology. From 1954 to 1958, she was a research fellow at the Duke University Parapsychology Laboratory, contributing to the experimental literature of the field with a productive group of then-young collaborators such as Robert Van de Castle (Van de Castle & White, 1955), and Margaret Anderson (Anderson & White, 1956, 1958a, 1958b). It was a heady time for the staff members of the Laboratory, and for the younger members especially exciting. The Parapsychology Laboratory occupied part of the second story of the West Duke Building on East Campus. On summer evenings after J. B. Rhine and the older staff members had gone home, White once told me, the younger researchers would kick off their shoes, put a rock and roll record on a portable turntable, and sit with their feet up double checking ESP data in the large upper story windows where the late afternoon breeze caught the scent of the magnolia trees on Duke University’s East Campus lawn.

In 1959, White began her lifelong association with the American Society for Psychical Research, starting out as a Research and Editorial Associate and finishing decades later as a consulting editor on the *Journal of the American Society for Psychical Research*. In 1965 she obtained a Masters in Library Science from the Pratt Institute in New York City and took up her “day job” as the Reference Librarian at the East Meadow Public Library in East Meadow, New York, a position she held for 30 years. She published

a number of seminal papers across her career, among them articles on "depth perspectives" (White, 1960), on methodology in ESP experiments (White, 1964), on spontaneous cases (Dale, Murphy, & White, 1962), on experimenter effects (White, 1976a, 1976b), on the ESP experiences of Catholic saints (White, 1981, 1982), on parapsychology and transcendence (White, 1984), and on feminist approaches to the field (White, 1994b), among other topics. Her work on the reference materials of the field moved Stanley Krippner to call her the field's "bibliographer" (e.g., White, 1965, White, 1977, 1989, 1991; White & Dale, 1973) as indeed she was. But she was also committed for a time to the professional needs of the field. She was elected to the presidency of the Parapsychological Association (PA) in 1984 and received the Outstanding Contributions to Research Award from that group in 1992.

White's most important work began before she retired from East Meadow Library, after she founded the Parapsychology Sources of Information Center (PSI Center) and established its main bibliographic publication, *Parapsychology Abstracts International* (PAI), and before her work on a doctorate in sociology at the State University of New York at Stony Brook (1991–1993)—the latter resulting in a never-finished doctoral dissertation that topped 3,000 pages by the time she died. As she pursued her quest to understand fully and deeply not only her own exceptional human experience (a term she coined) but also those of others, she left the confines of parapsychology proper and moved into a wider field of research that she largely defined. To that end she changed *PAI* into the journal *Exceptional Human Experience* and the PSI Center into the Exceptional Human Experience Network (EHEN) with its unique website, www.ehe.org. A flood of richly argued publications followed, among them a consideration of the implications of exceptional experiences for the philosophy of science (White, 1990), a presentation of the classification and compilation of exceptional experiences (White, 1994a, 1994c), a review of EHEs, dissociation, and narrative (White, 1997), and an examination of reflexivity and exceptional experiences (White, 1998).

Her library and papers were left to the Parapsychology Foundation where they are currently being incorporated into the existing collection. For a memorial to White written by Dr. Carlos S. Alvarado that includes a larger bibliography of her works and a series of reminiscences by her colleagues and friends, the reader is advised to check the Parapsychology Foundation website at <http://www.pflyceum.org/187.html>. For the dictionary of exceptional human experiences and many other information resources White compiled, her website, being maintained by the Parapsychology Foundation, is still on-line at <http://www.ehe.org>.

This brief characterization of White's life and work barely scratches the surface of her interests, her industry, her publications and her contributions to parapsychology, to transpersonal psychology (for which the Institute of Transpersonal Psychology awarded her an honorary doctorate

in 2006), and to the many members of her EHE Network. When she died on February 24, 2007, she was still working nearly every day even though her last few years had been overshadowed by a lingering and debilitating illness. After she died, her “retirement” home in New Bern, North Carolina, was a testament to the continued eagerness of her intellect, being full of books, computer files, journals, magazines, articles- and books-in-progress, and dozens upon dozens of correspondence and reprint files, not to mention a small army of well-loved cats, close friends, and devoted neighbors.

In her last years she was jealous of her morning hours—her New Bern friends were warned not to bother her when she was reading and writing—but she was giving of her time, spending hours on the phone listening, encouraging, talking, thinking aloud with a wide network of colleagues and collaborators, keeping up her athlete’s pace of life as well as she could even when she found it increasingly difficult to breathe. She was full of encouragement to many of us, an epitome of what a mentor should be. There are many of us who will remember and miss her well-lived life. But her real gift to us is that decades from now many more will join us in appreciating her diverse body of work.

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